

GABOR SZILASI

G.S.: Traces of man interest me very much, whether it's architecture or interiors or just a street or sign. There has to be a connection between nature and man in my photographs.

PROBABLY NO OTHER PHOTOGRAPHER HAS WORKED SO INTENSIVELY IN QUEBEC, TRACING INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR ENVIRONMENTS OF RURAL TOWNS, AND MORE DENSELY POPULATED CITIES, PORTRAYING PEOPLE IN THEIR MILIEU WHICH REFLECTS CHOICE, SOCIAL CLASS AND TASTE. FROM ABITIBI, ILE AUX Coudres AND BEAUCE TO RUE ST. CATHERINE, ~~MONTREAL~~ THE TEXAN RESTAURANT, CANADA CEMENT AND THE BOMBAY BOUTIQUE, WE ASSOCIATE A HUMAN PRESENCE WITH THE T.V. INHABITED INTERIORS AND THE FLICKERING NEON EXTERIORS.

G.S. When I photographed scenes in rural areas I didn't attempt to create monuments, that is, to create images that could be called typical of the Québec farmer. I didn't attempt to make a hero but rather to show him or her in a setting as an ordinary man or woman, a worker or an elderly, retired person living in a village surrounded by young people: an ordinary person. Of course, being Hungarian

my outlook is no doubt very different from that of a photographer born here. ~~He~~ ~~or she~~ sees his own society differently.

(P.1)

TP

I ~~have~~ worked for thirteen years at Office du film du Québec, and travelled extensively, ~~in rural Québec~~. During these travels I grew fond of the land, the people, and started documenting their ways of life.

My first trip, in 1970, was to Charlevoix County, along the St. Lawrence River, and Ile au Coudre. [↑] this region was still (in those days) relatively unspoiled by industrial society. ^{There is one photograph from this trip which I like a lot, a photo of Mme. Tremblay.} ~~Mme Tremblay has a traditional garb from Brittany.~~ ^{She was wearing}

Next to her, on a chest, ^{was} an old photograph showing her as a young girl; ~~the photograph~~ ^{it} had a distant feeling, ~~it's~~ faded, not only due to time, but also ^{because of} a reflection from ceiling light. It seemed ^{very} appropriate ~~at the time~~ for the image.

TP

There's another photo of ^{home} A corner of kitchen ~~in~~ the Lajoie family ^{home} on Ile au Coudre. On the wall we see the Cross of Temperance and what they call Saint Face, a picture of Christ. It's hanging above the television set, as in many homes in that ^{the} region. I find it

SZILASI

- 2 -

interesting that the television became as important as ^{the} religious artifacts. ~~In this kitchen the television set became~~ ^{It was} an icon just like the other objects on the wall.

P. 2.

P The next trip was to Beauce County, in 1973. ~~A photograph~~
 X ~~of Mr. and Mrs. Boucher~~ ^{I met ~~Mme~~ Boucher} in St-Bruno-à-l'arbre ~~She is sit-~~
 X ~~ting at the table on the left~~ ^{and she} ^{I asked them if I could take a photograph and} ^{they agreed.}
 X ~~lying on a couch on the right~~ ^{he} ^{was very sick,} ^{had} ^{just left the} ^{hospital.} ^{She was sitting}
 I was impressed by the duality, ^{the} ^{symmetry} of the ^{on the left}
 scene, where M. and Mme. Boucher became almost part of the ^{and her} ^{husband}
 furniture themselves. They are reduced to same size, to ^{was}
 same proportion as the armchair, the windows, the television
 set, etc. I returned three weeks later to St-Bruno-à-
 l'arbre to give them a photograph. I knocked on the door,
 X there was no answer. The neighbour told me that M~~r~~. Boucher ^{had}
 X died, and the ~~children put Mrs. Boucher in a foyer.~~ ~~The~~
 X children put ^{me} ~~Mrs.~~ Boucher in an old people's home. The
 house has been closed down, it was empty. Everything disap-
 peared in a matter of a few weeks, and I realized again, as
 so often before, that it is important to photograph things
 the way they are in the present, because everything just
 changes continually.

K.T.: Do you consider your photographs to be representational of rural Quebec, to be documents of the people, ~~and~~ the place and the time?

G.S.: ~~totally~~ All I can say is that I do my work from existing situations. Generally, they are found situations. I seek them out, but I don't interfere. I don't rearrange objects in an interior. Instead of simply adding or removing things, I will change the position of the camera or change the angle so as to make one object or another more

important in my composition: in other words, add a bit of drama. We are all directors to a certain extent, but I stop at the point of moving objects around.

After the war, I was very much influenced by the New Realism Italian films which took place on the streets, in homes and I enjoy working in similar situations. Real life is important to me.

K.T. In Quebec, certainly in the 70's, ~~there seemed to be~~
^{socio-}
 "documentary" photography, or photography as a commentary on society was very prevalent. ~~Do you think there's a reason for this.~~
 Since you were actively involved, do you have a perspective on this ~~was~~ phenomenon.

G.S.: My first reaction would be that Quebec is and always has been a politically active place. Or maybe because French Canadians are close to Europeans. Photo-journalism or reportage is a popular form here, as it is in Europe. But I really don't know.

K.T.: Can you talk about your participation in G.A.P, the Groupe D'Action Photographique?

G.S.: That was the beginning of the 70's. It lasted about 2 years. GAP was formed by four young photographers and they asked Pierre Gaudard and myself to join them. I think that one of the reasons that it didn't work out on my part was that I was always socially very conscious but I was

never very political. So ~~in my photography~~, when I photograph people in various kinds of environments, which, in a way, is a very social kind of photography, ~~it's~~ ^{it was} very quiet. I wasn't trying to change things.

I think one of the most worthwhile projects that I did with GAP was the exhibition of portraits of small businessmen and their commercial establishments.

The show was at COOPRIX, a cooperative supermarket on Blvd St. Joseph. A lot of people went there and really looked at the photos which were in ~~the~~ ^{the} cafeteria area. ~~in the place~~. Each of us selected two or three pictures; ~~and we shared expenses of printing, mounting and~~ I think I put in showed a portrait of a violin maker and ^{a picture of the interior of} a company which produces neon signs.

~~And the neon signs were made by K.T. Most of your work has been portraits and interiors, to the early seventies. Then you decided to put the two subjects together and add the dimension of colour to the interior. Can you talk about the process of arriving at this the two. particular idea.~~ ^{At the time,} ^{was} ^{which led to combining} ^{at this}

P.G.3.

G.S.: Colour photography always interested me, but I never knew what to do with it. I was ~~really not~~ ^{it} interested in photographing landscape because I ~~know~~ ^{knew} what the colours ~~are~~ ^{would be} like. I like ~~when~~ ^{to} colours surprise me. ~~This is~~ ^{That's} how I started photographing interiors, because I felt that colour interiors have a definite significance. They talk about ^{individual} ~~personal~~ tastes, ~~cultural differences, social status,~~ ^{certain materials, a level of culture or even of social class.}

Then I started working with pairs of photographs: black and white portraits of people in their home or studio, ~~then~~ a colour photograph of the interior itself. However the person isn't photographed in front of the same background, so there is not really a repetition. What I try to have is a visual reference or an indication somewhere at the edge of the photograph that ~~radicates~~ identifies the interior in the portrait. Then in the colour photograph, you have the same visual key somewhere else in the image. It's something that developed slowly. I always loved to do portraits and I love interiors and I thought that one could reinforce the other. You know, a black and white portrait next to a colour interior is such a juxtaposition. Not only the subject is different but because one is colour and the other is black and white, another set of contrasts ~~is set~~ is introduced. ~~And even~~ ^{To add} confusion, ~~then~~ ^{more,} ~~because~~ the portraits are done with a $2\frac{1}{4}$ camera, the interiors with 4×5 , so the grain structures ~~are~~ ~~different~~ are not identical.

In the portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Houde from Lotbinière, they are seated in their living room which looks normal

enough in black and white. When you ~~see~~^{discover} that the walls are bright ~~again~~ blue, you discover something about the interior and the people that you would not have known from the black and white image.

OR IN THE PORTRAIT OF CHERYL FLEHING, AN INNOCENT LOOKING WOMAN SITS BESIDE A BOOKCASE LINED WITH DOLLS. IN THE ADJACENT INTERIOR, A PINK AND YELLOW GRAPHIC CLIMBS ACROSS THE WALL, A PINK VELVET DIVAN LINGUISTES IN THE CENTER OF THE ROOM, PLANTS FLOURISH. THE INTERIOR CONTRADICTS THE PORTRAIT. INNOCENCE FADES AS THE SLIT SKIRT MOVES FURTHER UP HER LEG.

AND SOME
~~K.T.:~~ ~~Most of~~ INDIVIDUALS SURROUND THEMSELVES WITH TANGIBLE REMINDERS OF THEIR PAST. ^{IN} ~~THE~~ THE PORTRAIT OF ANDOR PASZTOR~~g~~, PART OF A BUREAU COVERED WITH PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORABILIA SLIPS INTO THE PICTURE. THE COLOUR INTERIOR AMPLIFIES THE DETAILS: THE PHOTOS HUNG WITH PAPER PICTURE HANGERS, TWO DIGITAL CLOCKS, ONE OF THEM MIDWAY BETWEEN 1:32 and 1:33, A RADIO.

G.S.: Mr. Pasztor, an old Hungarian gentleman, a friend of my fathers, lived alone with his memories.

IN ANOTHER SET OF PHOTOS, LOLA LANYI IN HER HODSECOAT STANDS AT THE ENTRANCE TO HER LIVING ROOM WHICH HAS A PROLIFERATION OF IMAGES OF WOMEN: 5 or 6 PAINTINGS,

WITH A IMAGE OF A FEMALE ON THE SCREEN.
 A MASK AND A TELEVISION SET ~~WITH A 352 LINE FEMALE~~
~~ALL THESE DETAILS ARE GOODS ACCUMULATED OVER TIME,~~
~~GOODS INDICATIVE OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S PERSONAL HISTORY.~~

G.S.: Lola Lanyi was an amateur painter and a very fascinating, very active person. She died a few years ago.

K.T. Most of your work has been done in ~~the~~ the context of a project, like the portraits/interiors or rural Quebec. ~~at St Catherine St.~~ Do you ever just go out and shoot in the streets?

G.S.: Sure. It's true that I tend to work in terms of a project and strangely enough they always come up every three years. Maybe it's coincidence, but if the next one comes up in three years, I'll start to ask myself questions. ~~But~~ I do carry my Minox and Leica with me most of the time. I use them as sketching tools. Sometimes, depending on my disposition, the environment and the weather, I go out for a day and just photograph. In a much looser way than with a 2 1/4 or a 4x5.

K.T.: Does the work that you do with a 35mm. ever become part of your "serious" work?

G.S. It's part of my serious work, not so much in terms of showing it, but it helps me loosen up with the 4x5. With a 35mm, you work very fast, you hardly look in the viewfinder and all sorts of interesting things happen in the composition. From it I've learnt that just because my camera is 4x5 and it's on a tripod, there is no reason

not to tilt it slightly, if the composition becomes more interesting, more dynamic. It's sometimes difficult to break a reaction to a camera with spirit levels ~~and~~ and a ground glass, ~~with a grid~~. You think everything should be straight, which isn't true. So in that sense, my 35mm work is closely connected to my 4x5 work.

K.T. You mentioned that your other love is architecture and that has been the subject matter for a number of projects - St. Catherine Street, the work with the 12x20 camera, colour photos of the vernacular architecture of Abitibi...

At one point,
G.S.: I had this idea that I wanted to do street intersections, not just where two streets intersect, ~~but~~ but 3 or more and I decided that the best way to ~~show~~ show this very urban phenomenon with the surrounding architecture was to use a panorama camera 12 x 20 inches. So I photographed in Montreal and other cities where I was until I had exhausted the idea. I remember being in San Francisco when I was starting the project and thinking that it would be the ideal city for the subject matter and camera format. The layout, ~~of San Francisco, its natural location and its architecture~~ lends itself to it. But I couldn't travel to San Francisco every weekend so I had to photograph where I was.

The St Catherine Street project, ^{was close to home and} came from my own experience of walking down it almost daily, ~~and it was close to home~~

SZILIASI

- 5 -

X ~~Montréal~~ ^{I noticed that people} ~~we~~ usually look at shop windows, neon signs, but never above the signs. We never really see the architecture of the commercial buildings. In this series I wanted to examine St. Catherine Street in terms of its architecture.

X ~~Super Sexe Palace shows, on the left, a commercial building~~
 X ~~that has been completely covered, and next to it, the Palace~~
 X ~~Cinema, that is in the middle of being modernized, and right~~
 X ~~now it isn't there any more.~~ ^{no new paragraph}

X ^{For example,} Banque de Montréal, with its Corinthian columns, makes a
 X funny contrast against the ^{cheap, modern} ~~inaudible~~ facade of ^{the commercial establishment,} Au Bon Mar-
 X ché Chéri. ^{Further along the street,} The imposing entrance to Archambault Musique re-
 X minds ^{ed} me of some European cities.

P The east end of St. Catherine Street is very different from downtown. It's less commercial, or rather, there are small shopkeepers, and many of the corners look as if we were in a small, provincial town.

K.F.: I assume this work was done with a 4x5.

G.S.: Yes. And at a particular time of year and time of day. In the fall around 3 or 4 in the afternoon when the sun hit one side of the street. I wanted as much detail as possible so it made sense to do it with a 4x5. The same goes for the architectural photos of

Abitibi where I was even stricter in my use of the camera.

This work was in colour, not black and white like St. Catherine Street, because ^{colour is an important element in rural Québec.} I ^{also} thought it was interesting to show

the choices people made ~~to decorate their houses on the outside~~

in terms of architectural style and decoration of the outside of

the building. So to highlight this, I photographed the

structures from almost the same position ~~frontal~~ and distance

and ~~illustration~~ Differences in details from one building to

the next could be easily seen. ~~And of course colour is~~

~~an important element in rural Québec.~~

K.T. Your most recent project was a series of neon signs in and around Montreal.

G.S.: Well, I guess I've always liked them and you can trace my attraction through photos here and there over a number of years. And I thought the timing was good for the project because neon is being used by so many commercial establishments.

~~now~~. It seems to be part of the high-tech ~~and~~ ~~modern~~

aesthetic. ~~I was also posing a problem for myself because~~

Most of the pictures had to be taken ~~in~~ in the evening when the neon lights were on ~~to get the full effect~~ of course, and there were some unexpected problems, ~~the~~ standing around for a

couple of hours because the owners didn't light up the sign, things like that.
~~But the project was mainly~~ My idea was mainly to document the neon signs which are part of our contemporary cultural environment.

K.T. Every project seems to have a definite subject. Is that important to you?

G.S. In the end, it's the subject itself that speaks. It contains everything, including poetic or symbolic aspects. For me, it's ninety percent ~~of photography~~ and the greatest problem in photography is finding a subject. It maybe the only form of artistic expression in which the subject is so important. A painter, even though he or she may be influenced by actual situations, can invent a subject, and the same is true of poets and writers. For ^{me as} a photographer, however, finding a good subject is the only way of expressing myself.